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THE EPIC

UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME

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THE BALLAD
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THE ART AND CRAFT OF LETTERS

THE EPIC

BY

LASCELLES
ABERCROMBIE

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PREFACE

As this essay is disposed to consider epic poetry as a species of literature, and not as a department of sociology or archæology or ethnology, the reader will not find in it anything material to the discussion which may be typified in those very interesting works, Gilbert Murray's *The Rise of the Greek Epic* and Andrew Lang's *The World of Homer*. The distinction between a literary and a scientific attitude to Homer (and all other "authentic" epic) is, I think, finally summed up in Mr. Mackail's *Lectures on Greek Poetry;* the following pages, at any rate, assume that this is so. Theories about epic origins were therefore indifferent to my purpose. Besides, I do not see the need for any theories; I think it need only be said, of any epic poem whatever, that it was composed by a man and transmitted by men. But this is not to say that investigation of the "authentic" epic poet's *milieu* may not be extremely profitable; and for settling the preliminaries of this essay, I owe a great deal to Mr. Chadwick's profoundly interesting study, *The Heroic Age;* though I dare say Mr. Chadwick would repudiate some of my conclusions. I must also acknowledge suggestions taken from

Mr. Macneile Dixon's learned and vigorous *English Epic and Heroic Poetry;* and especially the assistance of Mr. John Clark's *History of Epic Poetry*. Mr. Clark's book is so thorough and so adequate that my own would certainly have been superfluous, were it not that I have taken a particular point of view which his method seems to rule out—a point of view which seemed well worth taking. This is my excuse, too, for considering only the most conspicuous instances of epic poetry. They have been discussed often enough; but not often, so far as I know, primarily as stages of one continuous artistic development.

I

BEGINNINGS

THE invention of epic poetry corresponds with a definite and, in the history of the world, often recurring state of society. That is to say, epic poetry has been invented many times and independently; but, as the needs which prompted the invention have been broadly similar, so the invention itself has been. Most nations have passed through the same sort of chemistry. Before their hot racial elements have been thoroughly compounded, and thence have cooled into the stable convenience of routine which is the material shape of civilization—before this has firmly occurred, there has usually been what is called an "Heroic Age." It is apt to be the hottest and most glowing stage of the process. So much is commonplace. Exactly what causes the racial elements of a nation, with all their varying properties, to flash suddenly (as it seems) into the splendid incandescence of an Heroic Age, and thence to shift again into a comparatively rigid and perhaps comparatively lustreless civilization—this difficult matter has been very nicely investigated of late, and to interesting,

though not decided, result. But I may not concern myself with this; nor even with the detailed characteristics, alleged or ascertained, of the Heroic Age of nations. It is enough for the purpose of this book that the name "Heroic Age" is a good one for this stage of the business; it is obviously, and on the whole rightly, descriptive. For the stage displays the first vigorous expression, as the natural thing and without conspicuous restraint, of private individuality. In savagery, thought, sentiment, religion and social organization may be exceedingly complicated, full of the most subtle and strange relationships; but they exist as complete and determined *wholes*, each part absolutely bound up with the rest. Analysis has never come near them. The savage is blinded to the glaring incongruities of his tribal ideas not so much by habit or reverence; it is simply that the mere possibility of such a thing as analysis has never occurred to him. He thinks, he feels, he lives, all in a whole. Each person is the tribe in little. This may make everyone an astoundingly complex character; but it makes strong individuality impossible in savagery, since everyone accepts the same elaborate unanalysed whole of tribal existence. That existence, indeed, would find in the assertion of private individuality a serious danger; and tribal organization guards against this so efficiently that it is doubtless impossible, so long as there is no interruption from outside. In some obscure manner, however,

savage existence has been constantly interrupted ; and it seems as if the long-repressed forces of individuality then burst out into exaggerated vehemence ; for the result (if it is not slavery) is, that a people passes from its savage to its heroic age, on its way to some permanence of civilization. It must always have taken a good deal to break up the rigidity of savage society. It might be the shock of enforced mixture with a totally alien race, the two kinds of blood, full of independent vigour, compelled to flow together[1] ; or it might be the migration, due to economic stress, from one tract of country to which the tribal existence was perfectly adapted to another for which it was quite unsuited, with the added necessity of conquering the peoples found in possession. Whatever the cause may have been, the result is obvious : a sudden liberation, a delighted expansion, of numerous private individualities.

But the various appearances of the Heroic Age cannot, perhaps, be completely generalized. What has just been written will probably do for the Heroic Age which produced Homer, and for that which produced the *Nibelungenlied*, *Beowulf*, and the Northern Sagas. It may therefore stand as the typical case ; since Homer and these

[1] ὡς δ' ὅτε χείμαρροι ποταμοὶ κατ' ὄρεσφι ῥέοντες
εἰς μισγάγκειαν ξυμβάλλετον ὄβριμον ὕδωρ
κρουνῶν ἐκ μεγάλων κοίλης ἔντοσθε χαράδρης.

Iliad, IV, 452.

Northern poems are what most people have in their minds when they speak of "authentic" epic. But decidedly Heroic Ages have occurred much later than the latest of these cases; and they arose out of a state of society which cannot roundly be called savagery. Europe, for instance, had its unmistakable Heroic Age when it was fighting with the Moslem, whether that warfare was a cause or merely an accompaniment. And the period which preceded it, the period after the failure of Roman civilization, was sufficiently "dark" and devoid of individuality, to make the sudden plenty of potent and splendid individuals seem a phenomenon of the same sort as that which has been roughly described; it can scarcely be doubted that the age which is exhibited in the *Poem of the Cid*, the *Song of Roland*, and the lays of the Crusaders (*la Chanson d'Antioche*, for instance), was similar in all essentials to the age we find in Homer and the *Nibelungenlied*. Servia, too, has its ballad-cycles of Christian and Mahometan warfare, which suppose an age obviously heroic. But it hardly falls in with our scheme; Servia, at this time, might have been expected to have gone well past its Heroic Age. Either, then, it was somehow unusually prolonged, or else the clash of the Ottoman war revived it. The case of Servia is interesting in another way. The songs about the battle of Kossovo describe Servian defeat—defeat so overwhelming that poetry cannot possibly translate it, and does not

attempt to translate it, into anything that looks like victory. Even the splendid courage of its hero Milos, who counters an imputation of treachery by riding in full daylight into the Ottoman camp and murdering the Sultan, even this courage is rather near to desperation. The Marko cycle—Marko whose betrayal of his country seems wiped out by his immense prowess —has in a less degree this utter defeat of Servia as its background. But Servian history before all this has many glories, which, one would think, would serve the turn of heroic song better than appalling defeat and, indeed, enslavement. Why is the latter celebrated and not the former? The reason can only be this: heroic poetry depends on an heroic age, and an age is heroic because of what it is, not because of what it does. Servia's defeat by the armies of Amurath came at a time when its people was too strongly possessed by the heroic spirit to avoid uttering itself in poetry. And from this it appears, too, that when the heroic age sings, it primarily sings of itself, even when that means singing of its own humiliation.—One other exceptional kind of heroic age must just be mentioned, in this professedly inadequate summary. It is the kind which occurs quite locally and on a petty scale, with causes obscurer than ever. The Border Ballads, for instance, and the Robin Hood Ballads, clearly suppose a state of society which is nothing but a very circumscribed and not very

important heroic age. Here the households of gentry take the place of courts, and the poetry in vogue there is perhaps instantly taken up by the taverns; or perhaps this is a case in which the heroes are so little removed from common folk, that celebration of individual prowess begins among the latter, not, as seems usually to have happened, among the social equals of the heroes. But doubtless there are infinite grades in the structure of the Heroic Age.

The note of the Heroic Age, then, is vehement private individuality freely and greatly asserting itself. The assertion is not always what we should call noble; but it is always forceful and unmistakable. There would be, no doubt, some social and religious scheme to contain the individual's self-assertion; but the latter, not the former, is the thing that counts. It is not an age that lasts for very long as a rule; and before there comes the state in which strong social organization and strong private individuality are compatible—mutually helpful instead of destroying one another, as they do, in opposite ways, in savagery and in the Heroic Age—before the state called civilization can arrive, there has commonly been a long passage of dark obscurity, which throws up into exaggerated brightness the radiance of the Heroic Age. The balance of private good and general welfare is at the bottom of civilized morals; but the morals of the Heroic Age are founded on individuality, and on nothing

else. In Homer, for instance, it can be seen pretty clearly that a "good" man is simply a man of imposing, active individuality[1]; a "bad" man is an inefficient, undistinguished man—probably, too, like Thersites, ugly. It is, in fact, an absolutely aristocratic age—an age in which he who rules is thereby proven the "best." And from its nature it must be an age very heartily engaged in something; usually in fighting whoever is near enough to be fought with, though in *Beowulf* it seems to be doing something more profitable to the civilization which is to follow it—taming the fierceness of surrounding circumstance and man's primitive kind. But in any case it has a good deal of leisure; and the best way to prevent this from dragging heavily is (after feasting) to glory in the things it has done; or perhaps in the things it would like to have done. Hence heroic poetry. But exactly what heroic poetry was in its origin, probably we shall never know. It would scarcely be history, and it

[1] Etymologically, the "good" man is the "admirable" man. In this sense, Homer's gods are certainly "good"; every epithet he gives them—Joyous-Thunderer, Far-Darter, Cloud-Gatherer and the rest—proclaims their unapproachable "goodness." If it had been said to Homer, that his gods cannot be "good" because their behaviour is consistently cynical, cruel, unscrupulous and scandalous, he would simply think he had not heard aright: Zeus is an habitual liar, of course, but what has that got to do with his "goodness"?—Only those who would have Homer a kind of Salvationist need regret this. Just because he could only make his gods "good" in this primitive style, he was able to treat their discordant family in that vein of exquisite comedy which is one of the most precious things in the world.

would scarcely be very ornate poetry. The first thing required would be to translate the prowess of champions into good and moving narrative; and this would be metrified, because so it becomes both more exciting and more easily remembered. Each succeeding bard would improve, according to his own notions, the material he received from his teachers; the prowess of the great heroes would become more and more astonishing, more and more calculated to keep awake the feasted nobles who listened to the song. In an age when writing, if it exists at all, is a rare and secret art, the mists of antiquity descend after a very few generations. There is little chance of the songs of the bards being checked by recorded actuality; for if anyone could write at all, it would be the bards themselves, who would use the mystery for purposes of their own trade. In quite a short time, oral tradition, in keeping of the bards, whose business is to purvey wonders, makes the champions perform easily deeds which "the men of the present time" can only gape at; and every bard takes over the stock of tradition, not from original sources, but from the mingled fantasy and memory of the bard who came just before him. So that when this tradition survives at all, it survives in a form very different from what it was in the beginning. But apparently we can mark out several stages in the fortunes of the tradition. It is first of all court poetry, or perhaps baronial poetry; and

it may survive as that. From this stage it may pass into possession of the common people, or at least into the possession of bards whose clients are peasants and not nobles; from being court poetry it becomes the poetry of cottages and taverns. It may survive as this. Finally, it may be taken up again by the courts, and become poetry of much greater sophistication and nicety than it was in either of the preceding stages. But each stage leaves its sign on the tradition.

All this gives us what is conveniently called "epic material"; the material out of which epic poetry might be made. But it does not give us epic poetry. The world knows of a vast stock of epic material scattered up and down the nations; sometimes its artistic value is as extraordinary as its archæological interest, but not always. Instances are our own Border Ballads and Robin Hood Ballads; the Servian cycles of the Battle of Kossovo and the prowess of Marko; the modern Greek songs of the revolt against Turkey (the conditions of which seem to have been similar to those which surrounded the growth of our riding ballads); the fragments of Finnish legend which were pieced together into the *Kalevala;* the Ossianic poetry; and perhaps some of the minor sagas should be put in here. Then there are the glorious Welsh stories of Arthur, Tristram, and the rest, and the not less glorious Irish stories of Deirdre and

Cuchulain; both of these noble masses of legend seem to have only just missed the final shaping which turns epic material into epic poetry. For epic material, it must be repeated, is not the same thing as epic poetry. Epic material is fragmentary, scattered, loosely related, sometimes contradictory, each piece of comparatively small size, with no intention beyond hearty narrative. It is a heap of excellent stones, admirably quarried out of a great rock-face of stubborn experience. But for this to be worked into some great structure of epic poetry, the Heroic Age must be capable of producing individuality of much profounder nature than any of its fighting champions. Or rather, we should simply say that the production of epic poetry depends on the occurrence (always an accidental occurrence) of creative genius. It is quite likely that what Homer had to work on was nothing superior to the Arthurian legends. But Homer occurred; and the tales of Troy and Odysseus became incomparable poetry.

An epic is not made by piecing together a set of heroic lays, adjusting their discrepancies and making them into a continuous narrative. An epic is not even a re-creation of old things; it is altogether a new creation, a new creation in terms of old things. And what else is any other poetry? The epic poet has behind him a tradition of matter and a tradition of style; and that is what every other poet has behind him

too ; only, for the epic poet, tradition is rather narrower, rather more strictly compelling. This must not be lost sight of. It is what the poet does with the tradition he falls in which is, artistically, the important thing. He takes a mass of confused splendours, and he makes them into something which they certainly were not before ; something which, as we can clearly see by comparing epic poetry with mere epic material, the latter scarce hinted at. He makes this heap of matter into a grand design ; he forces it to obey a single presiding unity of artistic purpose. Obviously, something much more potent is required for this than a fine skill in narrative and poetic ornament. Unity is not merely an external affair. There is only one thing which can master the perplexed stuff of epic material into unity ; and that is, an ability to see in particular human experience some significant symbolism of man's general destiny.

It is natural that, after the epic poet has arrived, the crude epic material in which he worked should scarcely be heard of. It could only be handed on by the minstrels themselves ; and their audiences would not be likely to listen comfortably to the old piecemeal songs after they had heard the familiar events fall into the magnificent ordered pomp of the genuine epic poet. The tradition, indeed, would start afresh with him ; but how the novel tradition fared as it grew old with his successors, is difficult guess-

work. We can tell, however, sometimes, in what stage of the epic material's development the great unifying epic poet occurred. Three roughly defined stages have been mentioned. Homer perhaps came when the epic material was still in its first stage of being court-poetry. Almost certainly this is when the poets of the Crusading lays, of the *Song of Roland*, and the *Poem of the Cid*, set to work. Hesiod is a clear instance of the poet who masters epic material after it has passed into popular possession ; and the *Nibelungenlied* is thought to be made out of matter that has passed from the people back again to the courts.

Epic poetry, then, as distinct from mere epic material, is the concern of this book. The intention is, to determine wherein epic poetry is a definite species of literature, what it characteristically does for conscious human life, and to find out whether this species and this function have shown, and are likely to show, any development. It must be admitted, that the great unifying poet who worked on the epic material before him, did not always produce something which must come within the scope of this intention. Hesiod has just been given as an instance of such a poet ; but his work is scarcely an epic.[1] The great sagas, too, I must omit.

[1] Scarcely what *we* call epic. "Epos" might include Hesiod as well as epic material ; "epopee" is the business that Homer started.

They are epic enough in primary intention, but they are not poetry; and I am among those who believe that there is a difference between poetry and prose. If epic poetry is a definite species, the sagas do not fall within it. But this will leave me more of the "authentic" epic poetry than I can possibly deal with; and I shall have to confine myself to its greatest examples. Before, however, proceeding to consider epic poetry as a whole, as a constantly recurring form of art, continually responding to the new needs of man's developing consciousness, I must go, rapidly and generally, over the "literary epic"; and especially I must question whether it is really justifiable or profitable to divide epic poetry into the two contrasted departments of "authentic" and "literary."

II

LITERARY EPIC

Epic poetry, then, was invented to supply the artistic demands of society in a certain definite and recognizable state. Or rather, it was the epic material which supplied that; the first epic poets gave their age, as genius always does, something which the age had never thought of asking for; which, nevertheless, when it was given, the age took good hold of, and found that, after all, this, too, it had wanted without knowing it. But as society went on towards civilization, the need for epic grew less and less; and its preservation, if not accidental, was an act of conscious æsthetic admiration rather than of unconscious necessity. It was preserved somehow, however; and after other kinds of literature had arisen as inevitably and naturally as epic, and had become, in their turn, things of less instant necessity than they were, it was found that, in the manner and purpose of epic poetry, something was given which was not given elsewhere; something of extraordinary value. Epic poetry would therefore be undertaken again; but now, of course, deliberately. With several different kinds of poetry to choose from, a man would decide that

he would like best to be an epic poet, and he would set out, in conscious determination, on an epic poem. The result, good or bad, of such a determination is called "literary" epic. The poems of Apollonius Rhodius, Virgil, Lucan, Camoens, Tasso and Milton are "literary" epics. But such poetry as the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, the *Song of Roland*, and the *Nibelungenlied*, poetry which seems an immediate response to some general and instant need in its surrounding community—such poetry is "authentic" epic.

A great deal has been made of this distinction; it has almost been taken to divide epic poetry into two species. And, as the names commonly given to the two supposed species suggest, there is some notion that "literary" epic must be in a way inferior to "authentic" epic. The superstition of antiquity has something to do with this; but the presence of Homer among the "authentic" epics has probably still more to do with it. For Homer is the poet who is usually chosen to stand for "authentic" epic; and, by a facile association of ideas, the conspicuous characteristics of Homer seem to be the marks of "authentic" epic as a species. It is, of course, quite true, that, for sustained grandeur and splendour, no poet can be put beside Homer except Dante and Milton; but it is also quite clear that in Homer, as in Dante and Milton, such conspicuous characteristics are simply the marks of peculiar poetic

genius. If we leave Homer out, and consider poetic greatness only (the only important thing to consider), there is no "authentic" epic which can stand against *Paradise Lost* or the *Æneid*. Then there is the curious modern feeling—which is sometimes buttressed up by erroneous æsthetic theory (the worship of a quite notional "lyricism," for instance) but which is really nothing but a sign of covert barbarism—that lengthy poetic composition is somehow undesirable; and Homer is thought to have had a better excuse for composing a long poem than Milton.

But doubtless the real reason for the hard division of epic poetry into two classes, and for the presumed inferiority of "literary" to "authentic," lies in the application of that curiosity among false ideas, the belief in a "folk-spirit." This notion that such a thing as a "folk-spirit" can create art, and that the art which it does create must be somehow better than other art, is, I suppose, the offspring of democratic ideas in politics. The chief objection to it is that there never has been and never can be anything in actuality corresponding to the "folk-spirit" which this notion supposes. Poetry is the work of poets, not of peoples or communities; artistic creation can never be anything but the production of an individual mind. We may, if we like, think that poetry would be more "natural" if it were composed by the folk as the

folk, and not by persons peculiarly endowed; and to think so is doubtless agreeable to the notion that the folk is more important than the individual. But there is nothing gained by thinking in this way, except a very illusory kind of pleasure; since it is impossible that the folk should ever be a poet. This indisputable axiom has been ignored more in theories about ballads—about epic material—than in theories about the epics themselves. But the belief in a real folk-origin for ballads, untenable though it be in a little examination, has had a decided effect on the common opinion of the authentic epics. In the first place, a poem constructed out of ballads composed, somehow or other, by the folk, ought to be more "natural" than a work of deliberate art—a "literary" epic; that is to say, these Rousseau-ish notions will admire it for being further from civilization and nearer to the noble savage; civilization being held, by some mysterious argument, to be deficient in "naturalness." In the second place, this belief has made it credible that the plain corruption of authentic epic by oral transmission, or very limited transmission through script, might be the sign of multiple authorship; for if you believe that a whole folk can compose a ballad, you may easily believe that a dozen poets can compose an epic.

But all this rests on simple ignoring of the nature of poetic composition. The folk-origin of ballads and the multiple authorship of epics

are heresies worse than the futilities of the Baconians; at any rate, they are based on the same resolute omission, and build on it a wilder fantasy. They omit to consider what poetry is. Those who think Bacon wrote *Hamlet*, and those who think several poets wrote the *Iliad*, can make out a deal of ingenious evidence for their doctrines. But it is all useless, because the first assumption in each case is unthinkable. It is psychologically impossible that the mind of Bacon should have produced *Hamlet;* but the impossibility is even more clamant when it comes to supposing that several poets, not in collaboration, but in haphazard succession, could produce a poem of vast sweeping unity and superbly consistent splendour of style. So far as mere authorship goes, then, we cannot make any real difference between "authentic" and "literary" epic. We cannot say that, while this is written by an individual genius, that is the work of a community. Individual genius, of whatever quality, is responsible for both. The folk, however, cannot be ruled out. Genius does the work; but the folk is the condition in which genius does it. And here we may find a genuine difference between "literary" and "authentic"; not so much in the nature of the condition as in its closeness and insistence.

The kind of folk-spirit behind the poet is, indeed, different in the *Iliad* and *Beowulf* and the *Song of Roland* from what it is in Milton and

Tasso and Virgil. But there is also as much difference here between the members of each class as between the two classes themselves. You cannot read much of *Beowulf* with Homer in your mind, without becoming conscious that the difference in individual genius is by no means the whole difference. Both poets maintain a similar ideal in life; but they maintain it within conditions altogether unlike. The folk-spirit behind *Beowulf* is cloudy and tumultuous, finding grandeur in storm and gloom and mere mass—in the misty *lack* of shape. Behind Homer it is, on the contrary, radiant and, however vehement, always delighting in measure, finding grandeur in brightness and clarity and shining outline. So, again, we may very easily see how Tasso's poetry implies the Italy of his time, and Milton's the England of his time. But where Homer and Beowulf together differ from Tasso and Milton is in the way the surrounding folk-spirit contains the poet's mind. It would be a very idle piece of work, to choose between the potency of Homer's genius and of Milton's; but it is clear that the immediate circumstance of the poet's life presses much more insistently on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* than on *Paradise Lost*. It is the difference between the contracted, precise, but vigorous tradition of an heroic age, and the diffused, eclectic, complicated culture of a civilization. And if it may be said that the insistence of racial circumstance in Homer gives

him a greater intensity of cordial, human inspiration, it must also be said that the larger, less exacting conditions of Milton's mental life allow his art to go into greater scope and more subtle complexity of significance. Great epic poetry will always frankly accept the social conditions within which it is composed ; but the conditions contract and intensify the conduct of the poem, or allow it to dilate and absorb larger matter, according as the narrow primitive torrents of man's spirit broaden into the greater but slower volume of civilized life. The change is neither desirable nor undesirable ; it is merely inevitable. It means that epic poetry has kept up with the development of human life.

It is because of all this that we have heard a good deal about the "authentic" epic getting "closer to its subject" than "literary" epic. It seems, on the face of it, very improbable that there should be any real difference here. No great poetry, of whatever kind, is conceivable unless the subject has become integrated with the poet's mind and mood. Milton is as close to his subject, Virgil to his, as Homer to Achilles or the Saxon poet to Beowulf. What is really meant can be nothing but the greater insistence of racial tradition in the "authentic" epics. The subject of the *Iliad* is the fighting of heroes, with all its implications and consequences ; the subject of the *Odyssey* is adventure and its opposite, the longing for safety and home ; in

Beowulf it is kingship—the ability to show man how to conquer the monstrous forces of his world ; and so on. Such were the subjects which an imperious racial tradition pressed on the early epic poet, who delighted to be so governed. These were the matters which his people could understand, of which they could easily perceive the significance. For him, then, there could be no other matters than these, or the like of these. But it is not in such matters that a poet living in a time of less primitive and more expanded consciousness would find the highest importance. For a Roman, the chief matter for an epic poem would be Roman civilization ; for a Puritan, it would be the relations of God and man. When, therefore, we consider how close to his subject an epic poet is, we must be careful to be quite clear what his subject is. And if he has gone beyond the immediate experiences of primitive society, we need not expect him to be as close as the early poets were to the fury of battle and the agony of wounds and the desolation of widows ; or to the sensation of exploring beyond the familiar regions ; or to the marsh-fiends and fire-drakes into which primitive imagination naturally translated the terrible unknown powers of the world. We need not, in a word, expect the "literary" epic to compete with the "authentic" epic ; for the fact is, that the purpose of epic poetry, and therefore the nature of its subject, must continually develop. It is quite

true that the later epics take over, to a very great extent, the methods and manners of the earlier poems; just as architecture hands on the style of wooden structure to an age that builds in stone, and again imposes the manners of stone construction on an age that builds in concrete and steel. But, in the case of epic at any rate, this is not merely the inertia of artistic convention. With the development of epic intention, and the consequent choosing of themes larger and subtler than what common experience is wont to deal in, a certain duplicity becomes inevitable. The real intention of the *Æneid*, and the real intention of *Paradise Lost*, are not easily brought into vivid apprehension. The natural thing to do, then, would be to use the familiar substance of early epic, but to use it as a convenient and pleasant solvent for the novel intention. It is what has been done in all the great "literary" epics. But hasty criticism, finding that where they resembled Homer they seemed not so close to their matter, has taken this as a pervading and unfortunate characteristic. It has not perceived that what in Homer was the main business of the epic, has become in later epic a device. Having so altered, it has naturally lost in significance; but in the greatest instances of later epic, that for which the device was used has been as profoundly absorbed into the poet's being as Homer's matter was into his being. It may be noted, too, that a corresponding change has also

taken place in the opposite direction. As Homer's chief substance becomes a device in later epic, so a device of Homer's becomes in later epic the chief substance. Homer's supernatural machinery may be reckoned as a device—a device to heighten the general style and action of his poems; the *significance* of Homer must be found among his heroes, not among his gods. But with Milton, it has become necessary to entrust to the supernatural action the whole aim and purport of the poem.

On the whole, then, there is no reason why "literary" epic should not be as close to its subject as "authentic" epic; there is every reason why both kinds should be equally close. But in testing whether they actually are equally close, we have to remember that in the later epic it has become necessary to use the ostensible subject as a vehicle for the real subject. And who, with any active sympathy for poetry, can say that Milton felt his theme with less intensity than Homer? Milton is not so close to his fighting angels as Homer is to his fighting men; but the war in heaven is an incident in Milton's figurative expression of something that has become altogether himself—the mystery of individual existence in universal existence, and the accompanying mystery of sin, of individual will inexplicably allowed to tamper with the divinely universal will. Milton, of course, in closeness to his subject and in everything else, stands as

supreme above the other poets of literary epic as Homer does above the poets of authentic epic. But what is true of Milton is true, in less degree, of the others. If there is any good in them, it is primarily because they have got very close to their subjects : that is required not only for epic, but for all poetry. Coleridge, in a famous estimate, put twenty years for the shortest period in which an epic could be composed ; and of this, ten years were to be for preparation. He meant that not less than ten years would do for the poet to fill all his being with his theme ; and nothing else will serve. It is well known how Milton brooded over his subject, how Virgil lingered over his, how Camoens carried the *Lusiads* round the world with him, with what furious intensity Tasso gave himself to writing *Jerusalem Delivered*. We may suppose, perhaps, that the poets of " authentic " epic had a somewhat easier task. There was no need for them to be " long choosing and beginning late." The pressure of racial tradition would see that they chose the right sort of subject ; would see, too, that they lived right in the heart of their subject. For the poet of " literary " epic, however, it is his own consciousness that must select the kind of theme which will fulfil the epic intention for his own day ; it is his own determination and studious endurance that will draw the theme into the secrets of his being. If he is not capable of getting close to his subject, we should not

for that reason call his work "literary" epic. It would put him in the class of Milton, the most literary of all poets. We must simply call his stuff bad epic. There is plenty of it. Southey is the great instance. Southey would decide to write an epic about Spain, or India, or Arabia, or America. Next he would read up, in several languages, about his proposed subject; that would take him perhaps a year. Then he would versify as much strange information as he could remember; that might take a few months. The result is deadly; and because he was never anywhere near his subject. It is for the same reason that the unspeakable labours of Blackmore, Glover and Wilkie, and Voltaire's ridiculous *Henriade*, have gone to pile up the rubbish-heaps of literature.

So far, supposed differences between "authentic" and "literary" epic have resolved themselves into little more than signs of development in epic intention; the change has not been found to produce enough artistic difference between early and later epic to warrant anything like a division into two distinct species. The epic, whether "literary" or "authentic," is a single form of art; but it is a form capable of adapting itself to the altering requirements of prevalent consciousness. In addition, however, to differences in general conception, there are certain mechanical differences which should be just noticed. The first epics were intended for

recitation ; the literary epic is meant to be read. It is more difficult to keep the attention of hearers than of readers. This in itself would be enough to rule out themes remote from common experience, supposing any such were to suggest themselves to the primitive epic poet. Perhaps, indeed, we should not be far wrong if we saw a chief reason for the pressure of surrounding tradition on the early epic in this very fact, that it is poetry meant for recitation. Traditional matter must be glorified, since it would be easier to listen to the re-creation of familiar stories than to quite new and unexpected things ; the listeners, we must remember, needed poetry chiefly as the recreation of tired hours. Traditional manner would be equally difficult to avoid ; for it is a tradition that plainly embodies the requirements, fixed by experience, of *recited* poetry. Those features of it which make for tedium when it is read—repetition, stock epithets, set phrases for given situations—are the very things best suited, with their recurring well-known syllables, to fix the attention of listeners more firmly, or to stir it when it drowses ; at the least they provide a sort of recognizable scaffolding for the events, and it is remarkable how easily the progress of events may be missed when poetry is declaimed. Indeed, if the primitive epic poet could avoid some of the anxieties peculiar to the composition of literary epic, he had others to make up for it. He had

to study closely the delicate science of holding auricular attention when once he had got it; and probably he would have some difficulty in getting it at all. The really great poet challenges it, like Homer, with some tremendous, irresistible opening; and in this respect the magnificent prelude to *Beowulf* may almost be put beside Homer. But lesser poets have another way. That prolixity at the beginning of many primitive epics, their wordy deliberation in getting under way, is probably intentional. The *Song of Roland*, for instance, begins with a long series of exceedingly dull stanzas; to a reader, the preliminaries of the story seem insufferably drawn out. But by the time the reciter had got through this unimportant dreariness, no doubt his audience had settled down to listen. The *Chanson d'Antioche* contains perhaps the most illuminating admission of this difficulty. In the first "Chant," the first section opens:[1]

> Seigneurs, faites silence; et que tout bruit cesse,
> Si vous voulez entendre une glorieuse chanson.
> Aucun jongleur ne vous en dira une meilleure.

Then some vaguely prelusive lines. But the audience is clearly not quite ready yet, for the second section begins:

> Barons, écoutez-moi, et cessez vos querelles!
> Je vous dirai une très-belle chanson.

[1] From the version of the Marquise de Sainte-Aulaire.

And after some further prelude, the section ends :

Ici commence la chanson où il y a tant à apprendre.

The " chanson " does, indeed, make some show of beginning in the third section, but it still moves with a cautious and prelusive air, as if anxious not to launch out too soon. And this was evidently prudent, for when the fourth section opens, direct exhortation to the audience has again become necessary :

Maintenant, seigneurs, écoutez ce que dit l'Écriture ;

And once more in the fifth section :

Barons, écoutez un excellent couplet.

In the sixth, the jongleur is getting desperate :

Seigneurs, pour l'amour de Dieu, faites silence, écoutez-moi,
Pour qu'en partant de ce monde vous entriez dans un meilleur ;

but after this exclamation he has his way, though the story proper is still a good way off. Perhaps not all of these hortatory stanzas were commonly used ; any or all of them could certainly be omitted without damaging the poem. But they were there to be used, according to the judgment of the jongleur and the temper of his audience, and their presence in the poem is very suggestive of the special difficulties in the art of rhapsodic poetry.

But the gravest difficulty, and perhaps the most important, in poetry meant solely for recitation, is the difficulty of achieving verbal beauty, or rather of making verbal beauty tell. Vigorous but controlled imagination, formative power, insight into the significance of things—these are qualities which a poet must eminently possess; but these are qualities which may also be eminently possessed by men who cannot claim the title of poet. The real differentia of the poet is his command over the secret magic of words. Others may have as delighted a sense of this magic, but it is only the poet who can master it and do what he likes with it. And next to the invention of speaking itself, the most important invention for the poet has been the invention of writing and reading; for this has added immensely to the scope of his mastery over words. No poet will ever take the written word as a substitute for the spoken word; he knows that it is on the spoken word, and the spoken word only, that his art is founded. But he trusts his reader to do as he himself does—to receive written words always as the code of spoken words. To do so has wonderfully enlarged his technical opportunities; for apprehension is quicker and finer through the eye than through the ear. After the invention of reading, even poetry designed primarily for declamation (like drama or lyric) has depths and subtleties of art which were not possible for the primitive poet.

Accordingly we find that, on the whole, in comparison with "literary" epic, the texture of "authentic" epic is flat and dull. The story may be superb, and its management may be superb; but the words in which the story lives do not come near the grandeur of Milton, or the exquisiteness of Virgil, or the deliciousness of Tasso. Indeed, if we are to say what is the real difference between *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*, we must simply say that *Beowulf* is not such good poetry. There is, of course, one tremendous exception; Homer is the one poet of authentic epic who had sufficient genius to make unfailingly, nobly beautiful poetry within the strict and hard conditions of purely auricular art. Compare Homer's ambrosial glory with the decent tap-water of Hesiod; compare his continuous burnished gleam of wrought metal with the sparse grains that lie in the sandy diction of all the "authentic" epics of the other nations. And, by all ancient accounts, the other early Greek epics would not fare much better in the comparison. Homer's singularity in this respect is overwhelming; but it is frequently forgotten, and especially by those who think to help in the Homeric question by comparing him with other "authentic" epics. Supposing (we can only just suppose it) a case were made out for the growth rather than the individual authorship of some "authentic" epic other than Homer; it could never have any bearing on the question

of Homeric authorship, because no early epic is comparable with the *poetry* of Homer. Nothing, indeed, is comparable with the poetry of Homer, except poetry for whose individual authorship history unmistakably vouches.

So we cannot say that Homer was not as deliberate a craftsman in words as Milton himself. The scope of his craft was more restricted, as his repetitions and stock epithets show; he was restricted by the fact that he composed for recitation, and the auricular appreciation of diction is limited, the nature of poetry obeying, in the main, the nature of those for whom it is composed. But this is just a case in which genius transcends technical scope. The effects Homer produced with his methods were as great as any effects produced by later and more elaborate methods, after poetry began to be read as well as heard. But neither must we say that the other poets of "authentic" epic were not deliberate craftsmen in words. Poets will always get as much beauty out of words as they can. The fact that so often in the early epics a magnificent subject is told, on the whole, in a lumpish and tedious diction, is not to be explained by any contempt for careful art, as though it were a thing unworthy of such heroic singers; it is simply to be explained by lack of such genius as is capable of transcending the severe limitations of auricular poetry. And we may well believe that only the rarest and most

potent kind of genius could transcend such limitations.

In summary, then, we find certain conceptual differences and certain mechanical differences between "authentic" and "literary" epic. But these are not such as to enable us to say that there is, artistically, any real difference between the two kinds. Rather, the differences exhibit the changes we might expect in an art that has kept up with consciousness developing, and civilization becoming more intricate. "Literary" epic is as close to its subject as "authentic"; but, as a general rule, "authentic" epic, in response to its surrounding needs, has a simple and concrete subject, and the closeness of the poet to this is therefore more obvious than in "literary" epic, which (again in response to surrounding needs) has been driven to take for subject some great abstract idea and display this in a concrete but only ostensible subject. Then in craftsmanship, the two kinds of epic are equally deliberate, equally concerned with careful art; but "literary" epic has been able to take such advantage of the habit of reading that, with the single exception of Homer, it has achieved a diction much more answerable to the greatness of epic matter than the "authentic" poems. We may, then, in a general survey, regard epic poetry as being in all ages essentially the same kind of art, fulfilling always a similar, though constantly developing,

intention. Whatever sort of society he lives in, whether he be surrounded by illiterate heroism or placid culture, the epic poet has a definite function to perform. We see him accepting, and with his genius transfiguring, the general circumstance of his time; we see him symbolizing, in some appropriate form, whatever sense of the significance of life he feels acting as the accepted unconscious metaphysic of his age. To do this, he takes some great story which has been absorbed into the prevailing consciousness of his people. As a rule, though not quite invariably, the story will be of things which are, or seem, so far back in the past, that anything may credibly happen in it; so imagination has its freedom, and so significance is displayed. But quite invariably, the materials of the story will have an unmistakable air of actuality; that is, they come profoundly out of human experience, whether they declare legendary heroism, as in Homer and Virgil, or myth, as in *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*, or actual history, as in Lucan and Camoens and Tasso. And he sets out this story and its significance in poetry as lofty and as elaborate as he can compass. That, roughly, is what we see the epic poets doing, whether they be "literary" or "authentic"; and if this can be agreed on, we should now have come tolerably close to a definition of epic poetry.

III

THE NATURE OF EPIC

Rigid definitions in literature are, however, dangerous. At bottom, it is what we feel, not what we think, that makes us put certain poems together and apart from others; and feelings cannot be defined, but only related. If we define a poem, we say what we think about it; and that may not sufficiently imply the essential thing the poem does for us. Hence the definition is liable either to be too strict, or to admit work which does not properly satisfy the criterion of feeling. It seems probable that, in the last resort, classification in literature rests on that least tangible, least definable matter, style; for style is the sign of the poem's spirit, and it is the spirit that we feel. If we can get some notion of how those poems, which we call epic, agree with one another in style, it is likely we shall be as close as may be to a definition of epic. I use the word "style," of course, in its largest sense—manner of conception as well as manner of composition.

An easy way to define epic, though not a very profitable way, would be to say simply, that an epic is a poem which produces feelings similar

to those produced by *Paradise Lost* or the *Iliad*, *Beowulf* or the *Song of Roland*. Indeed, you might include all the epics of Europe in this definition without losing your breath; for the epic poet is the rarest kind of artist. And while it is not a simple matter to say off-hand what it is that is common to all these poems, there seems to be a general acknowledgment that they are clearly separable from other kinds of poetry; and this although the word epic has been rather badly abused. For instance, *The Faery Queene* and *La Divina Commedia* have been called epic poems; but I do not think that anyone could fail to admit, on a little pressure, that the experience of reading *The Faery Queene* or *La Divina Commedia* is not in the least like the experience of reading *Paradise Lost* or the *Iliad*. But as a poem may have lyrical qualities without being a lyric, so a poem may have epical qualities without being an epic. In all the poems which the world has agreed to call epics, there is a story told, and well told. But Dante's poem attempts no story at all, and Spenser's, though it attempts several, does not tell them well—it scarcely attempts to make the reader believe in them, being much more concerned with the decoration and the implication of its fables than with the fables themselves. What epic quality, detached from epic proper, do these poems possess, then, apart from the mere fact that they take up a great many pages? It is simply a question of

their style—the style of their conception and the style of their writing; the whole style of their imagination, in fact. They take us into a region in which nothing happens that is not deeply significant; a dominant, noticeably symbolic, purpose presides over each poem, moulds it greatly and informs it throughout.

This takes us some little way towards deciding the nature of epic. It must be a story, and the story must be told well and greatly; and, whether in the story itself or in the telling of it, significance must be implied. Does that mean that the epic must be allegorical? Many have thought so; even Homer has been accused of constructing allegories. But this is only a crude way of emphasizing the significance of epic; and there is a vast deal of difference between a significant story and an allegorical story. Reality of substance is a thing on which epic poetry must always be able to rely. Not only because Spenser does not tell his stories very well, but even more because their substance (not, of course, their meaning) is deliciously and deliberately unreal, *The Faery Queene* is outside the strict sense of the word epic. Allegory requires material ingeniously manipulated and fantastic; what is more important, it requires material invented by the poet himself. That is a long way from the solid reality of material which epic requires. Not manipulation, but imaginative transfiguration of material; not invention, but selection of

existing material appropriate to his genius, and complete absorption of it into his being; that is how the epic poet works. Allegory is a beautiful way of inculcating and asserting some special significance in life; but epic has a severer task, and a more impressive one. It has not to say, Life in the world *ought* to mean this or that; it has to show life unmistakably *being* significant. It does not gloss or interpret the fact of life, but re-creates it and charges the fact itself with the poet's own sense of ultimate values. This will be less precise than the definite assertions of allegory; but for that reason it will be more deeply felt. The values will be emotional and spiritual rather than intellectual. And they will be the poet's own only because he has made them part of his being; in him (though he probably does not know it) they will be representative of the best and most characteristic life of his time. That does not mean that the epic poet's image of life's significance is of merely contemporary or transient importance. No stage through which the general consciousness of men has gone can ever be outgrown by men; whatever happens afterwards does not displace it, but includes it. We could not do without *Paradise Lost* nowadays; but neither can we do without the *Iliad*. It would not, perhaps, be far from the truth, if it were even said that the significance of *Paradise Lost* cannot be properly understood unless the significance of the *Iliad* be understood.

The prime material of the epic poet, then, must be real and not invented. But when the story of the poem is safely concerned with some reality, he can, of course, graft on this as much appropriate invention as he pleases; it will be one of his ways of elaborating his main, unifying purpose—and to call it "unifying" is to assume that, however brilliant his surrounding invention may be, the purpose will always be firmly implicit in the central subject. Some of the early epics manage to do without any conspicuous added invention designed to extend what the main subject intends; but such nobly simple, forthright narrative as *Beowulf* and the *Song of Roland* would not do for a purpose slightly more subtle than what the makers of these ringing poems had in mind. The reality of the central subject is, of course, to be understood broadly. It means that the story must be founded deep in the general experience of men. A decisive campaign is not, for the epic poet, any more real than a legend full of human truth. All that the name of Cæsar suggests is extremely important for mankind; so is all that the name of Satan suggests: Satan, in this sense, is as real as Cæsar. And, as far as reality is concerned, there is nothing to choose between the Christians taking Jerusalem and the Greeks taking Troy; nor between Odysseus sailing into fairyland and Vasco da Gama sailing round the world. It is certainly possible that a poet might devise a story

of such a kind that we could easily take it as something which might have been a real human experience. But that is not enough for the epic poet. He needs something which everyone knows about, something which indisputably, and admittedly, *has been* a human experience; and even Grendel, the fiend of the marshes, was, we can clearly see, for the poet of *Beowulf* a figure profoundly and generally accepted as not only true but real; what, indeed, can be more real for poetry than a devouring fiend which lives in pestilent fens? And the reason why epic poetry so imperiously demands reality of subject is clear; it is because such poetry has symbolically to re-create the actual fact and the actual particulars of human existence in terms of a general significance—the reader must feel that life itself has submitted to plastic imagination. No fiction will ever have the air, so necessary for this epic symbolism, not merely of representing, but of unmistakably *being*, human experience. This might suggest that history would be the thing for an epic poet; and so it would be, if history were superior to legend in poetic reality. But, simply as substance, there is nothing to choose between them; while history has the obvious disadvantage of being commonly too strict in the manner of its events to allow of creative freedom. Its details will probably be so well known, that any modification of them will draw more attention to discrepancy with the

records than to achievement thereby of poetic purpose. And yet modification, or at least suppression and exaggeration, of the details of history will certainly be necessary. Not to declare what happened, and the results of what happened, is the object of an epic ; but to accept all this as the mere material in which a single artistic purpose, a unique, vital symbolism may be shaped. And if legend, after passing for innumerable years through popular imagination, still requires to be shaped at the hands of the epic poet, how much more must the crude events of history require this ! For it is not in events as they happen, however notably, that man may see symbols of vital destiny, but in events as they are transformed by plastic imagination.

Yet it has been possible to use history as the material of great epic poetry ; Camoens and Tasso did this—the chief subject of the *Lusiads* is even contemporary history. But evidently success in these cases was due to the exceptional and fortunate fact that the fixed notorieties of history were combined with a strange and mysterious geography. The remoteness and, one might say, the romantic possibilities of the places into which Camoens and Tasso were led by their themes, enable imagination to deal pretty freely with history. But in a little more than ten years after Camoens glorified Portugal in an historical epic, Don Alonso de Ercilla tried to do the same for Spain. He puts his action far enough from

home: the Spaniards are conquering Chili. But the world has grown smaller and more familiar in the interval: the astonishing things that could easily happen in the seas of Madagascar cannot now conveniently happen in Chili. The *Araucana* is versified history, not epic. That is to say, the action has no deeper significance than any other actual warfare; it has not been, and could not have been, shaped to any symbolic purpose. Long before Tasso and Camoens and Ercilla, two Scotchmen had attempted to put patriotism into epic form; Barbour had written his *Bruce* and Blind Harry his *Wallace*. But what with the nearness of their events, and what with the rusticity of their authors, these tolerable, ambling poems are quite unable to get the better of the hardness of history. Probably the boldest attempt to make epic of well-known, documented history is Lucan's *Pharsalia*. It is a brilliant performance, and a deliberate effort to carry on the development of epic. At the very least it has enriched the thought of humanity with some imperishable lines. But it is true, what the great critic said of it: the *Pharsalia* partakes more of the nature of oratory than of poetry. It means that Lucan, in choosing history, chose something which he had to declaim about, something which, at best, he could imaginatively realize; but not something which he could imaginatively re-create. It is quite different with poems like the *Song of Roland*. They are

composed in, or are drawn immediately out of, an heroic age ; an age, that is to say, when the idea of history has not arisen, when anything that happens turns inevitably, and in a surprisingly short time, into legend. Thus, an unimportant, probably unpunished, attack by Basque mountaineers on the Emperor's rear-guard has become, in the *Song of Roland*, a great infamy of Saracenic treachery, which must be greatly avenged.

Such, in a broad description, is the nature of epic poetry. To define it with any narrower nicety would probably be rash. We have not been discovering what an epic poem ought to be, but roughly examining what similarity of quality there is in all those poems which we feel, strictly attending to the emotional experience of reading them, can be classed together and, for convenience, termed epic. But it is not much good having a name for this species of poetry if it is given as well to poems of quite a different nature. It is not much good agreeing to call by the name of epic such poems as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf* and the *Song of Roland*, *Paradise Lost* and *Gerusalemme Liberata*, if epic is also to be the title for *The Faery Queene* and *La Divina Commedia*, *The Idylls of the King* and *The Ring and the Book*. But I believe most of the importance in the meaning of the word epic, when it is reasonably used, will be found in what is written above. Apart from the specific form of epic,

it shares much of its ultimate intention with the greatest kind of drama (though not with all drama). And just as drama, whatever grandeur of purpose it may attempt, must be a good play, so epic must be a good story. It will tell its tale both largely and intensely, and the diction will be carried on the volume of a powerful, flowing metre. To distinguish, however, between merely narrative poetry, and poetry which goes beyond being mere narrative into the being of epic, must often be left to feeling which can scarcely be precisely analysed. A curious instance of the difficulty in exactly defining epic (but not in exactly deciding what is epic) may be found in the work of William Morris. Morris left two long narrative poems, *The Life and Death of Jason*, and *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*. I do not think anyone need hesitate to put *Sigurd* among the epics ; but I do not think anyone who will scrupulously compare the experience of reading *Jason* with the experience of reading *Sigurd*, can help agreeing that *Jason* should be kept out of the epics. There is nothing to choose between the subjects of the two poems. For an Englishman, Greek mythology means as much as the mythology of the North. And I should say that the bright, exact diction and the modest metre of *Jason* are more interesting and attractive than the diction, often monotonous and vague, and the metre, often clumsily vehement, of *Sigurd*. Yet for all that it is the style of *Sigurd* that puts

it with the epics and apart from *Jason;* for style goes beyond metre and diction, beyond execution, into conception. The whole imagination of *Sigurd* is incomparably larger than that of *Jason.* In *Sigurd*, you feel that the fashioning grasp of imagination has not only seized on the show of things, and not only on the physical or moral unity of things, but has somehow brought into the midst of all this, and has kneaded into the texture of it all, something of the ultimate and metaphysical significance of life. You scarcely feel that in *Jason.*

Yes, epic poetry must be an affair of evident largeness. It was well said, that "the praise of an epic poem is to feign a person exceeding Nature." "Feign" here means to imagine; and imagine does not mean to invent. But, like most of the numerous epigrams that have been made about epic poetry, the remark does not describe the nature of epic, but rather one of the conspicuous signs that that nature is fulfilling itself. A poem which is, in some sort, a summation for its time of the values of life, will inevitably concern itself with at least one figure, and probably with several, in whom the whole virtue, and perhaps also the whole failure, of living seems superhumanly concentrated. A story weighted with the epic purpose could not proceed at all, unless it were expressed in persons big enough to support it. The subject, then, as the epic poet uses it, will obviously be an

important one. Whether, apart from the way the poet uses it, the subject ought to be an important one, would not start a very profitable discussion. Homer has been praised for making, in the *Iliad*, a first-rate poem out of a second-rate subject. It is a neat saying ; but it seems unlikely that anything really second-rate should turn into first-rate epic. I imagine Homer would have been considerably surprised, if anyone had told him that the vast train of tragic events caused by the gross and insupportable insult put by Agamemnon, the mean mind in authority, on Achilles, the typical hero—that this noble and profoundly human theme was a second-rate subject. At any rate, the subject must be of capital importance in its treatment. It must symbolize—not as a particular and separable assertion, but at large and generally—some great aspect of vital destiny, without losing the air of recording some accepted reality of human experience, and without failing to be a good story ; and the pressure of high purpose will inform diction and metre, as far, at least, as the poet's verbal art will let it.

The usual attempts at stricter definition of epic than anything this chapter contains, are either, in spite of what they try for, so vague that they would admit almost any long stretch of narrative poetry ; or else they are based on the accidents or devices of epic art ; and in that case they are apt to exclude work which

is essentially epic because something inessential is lacking. It has, for instance, been seriously debated, whether an epic should not contain a catalogue of heroes. Other things, which epics have been required to contain, besides much that is not worth mentioning,[1] are a descent into hell and some supernatural machinery. Both of these are obviously devices for enlarging the scope of the action. The notion of a visit to the ghosts has fascinated many poets, and Dante elaborated this Homeric device into the main scheme of the greatest of non-epical poems, as Milton elaborated the other Homeric device into the main scheme of the greatest of literary epics. But a visit to the ghosts is, of course, like games or single combat or a set debate, merely an incident which may or may not be useful. Supernatural machinery, however, is worth some short discussion here, though it must be alluded to further in the sequel. The first and obvious thing to remark is, that an unquestionably epic effect can be given without any supernatural machinery at all. The poet of *Beowulf* has no need of it, for instance. A Christian redactor has worked over the poem, with more piety than skill; he can always be detected, and his clumsy little interjections have nothing to do with the general tenour of the

[1] Such as similes and episodes. It is as if a man were to say, the essential thing about a bridge is that it should be painted.

poem. The human world ends off, as it were, precipitously; and beyond there is an endless, impracticable abyss in which dwells the secret governance of things, an unknowable and implacable fate—"Wyrd"—neither malign nor benevolent, but simply inscrutable. The peculiar cast of noble and desolate courage which this bleak conception gives to the poem is perhaps unique among the epics.

But very few epic poets have ventured to do without supernatural machinery of some sort. And it is plain that it must greatly assist the epic purpose to surround the action with immortals who are not only interested spectators of the event, but are deeply implicated in it; nothing could more certainly liberate, or at least more appropriately decorate, the significant force of the subject. We may leave Milton out, for there can be no question about *Paradise Lost* here; the significance of the subject is not only liberated by, it entirely exists in, the supernatural machinery. But with the other epic poets, we should certainly expect them to ask us for our belief in their immortals. That, however, is just what they seem curiously careless of doing. The immortals are there, they are the occasion of splendid poetry; they do what they are intended to do—they declare, namely, by their speech and their action, the importance to the world of what is going on in the poem. Only—there is no obligation to believe in them; and will not that mean, no

obligation to believe in their concern for the subject, and all that that implies ? Homer begins this paradox. Think of that lovely and exquisitely mischievous passage in the *Iliad* called *The Cheating of Zeus*. The salvationist school of commentators calls this an interpolation ; but the spirit of it is implicit throughout the whole of Homer's dealing with the gods ; whenever, at least, he deals with them at length, and not merely incidentally. Not to accept that spirit is not to accept Homer. The manner of describing the Olympian family at the end of the first book is quite continuous throughout, and simply reaches its climax in the fourteenth book. Nobody ever believed in Homer's gods, as he must believe in Hektor and Achilles. (Puritans like Xenophanes were annoyed not with the gods for being as Homer described them, but with Homer for describing them as he did.) Virgil is more decorous ; but can we imagine Virgil praying, or anybody praying, to the gods of the *Æneid ?* The supernatural machinery of Camoens and Tasso is frankly absurd ; they are not only careless of credibility, but of sanity. Lucan tried to do without gods ; but his witchcraft engages belief even more faintly than the mingled Paganism and Christianity of Camoens, and merely shows how strongly the most rationalistic of epic poets felt the value of some imaginary relaxation in the limits of human existence. Is it, then, only as such a relaxation that super-

natural machinery is valuable ? Or only as a superlative kind of ornament ? It is surely more than that. In spite of the fact that we are not seriously asked to believe in it, it does beautifully and strikingly crystallize the poet's determination to show us things that go past the reach of common knowledge. But by putting it, whether instinctively or deliberately, on a lower plane of credibility than the main action, the poet obeys his deepest and gravest necessity : the necessity of keeping his poem emphatically an affair of recognizable *human* events. It is of man, and man's purpose in the world, that the epic poet has to sing ; not of the purpose of gods. The gods must only illustrate man's destiny ; and they must be kept within the bounds of beautiful illustration. But it requires a finer genius than most epic poets have possessed, to keep supernatural machinery just sufficiently fanciful without missing its function. Perhaps only Homer and Virgil have done that perfectly. Milton's revolutionary development marks a crisis in the general process of epic so important, that it can only be discussed when that process is considered, in the following chapter, as a whole.

IV

THE EPIC SERIES

By the general process of epic poetry, I mean the way this form of art has constantly responded to the profound needs of the society in which it was made. But the development of human society does not go straight forward; and the epic process will therefore be a recurring process, the series a recurring series—though not in exact repetition. Thus, the Homeric poems, the *Argonautica*, the *Æneid*, the *Pharsalia*, and the later Latin epics, form one series: the *Æneid* would be the climax of the series, which thence declines, were it not that the whole originates with the incomparable genius of Homer—a fact which makes it seem to decline from start to finish. Then the process begins again, and again fulfils itself, in the series which goes from *Beowulf*, the *Song of Roland*, and the *Nibelungenlied*, through Camoens and Tasso up to Milton. And in this case Milton is plainly the climax. There is nothing like *Paradise Lost* in the preceding poems, and epic poetry has done nothing since but decline from that towering glory.

But it will be convenient not to make too much of chronology, in a general account of epic

development. It has already appeared that the duties of all "authentic" epic are broadly the same, and the poems of this kind, though two thousand years may separate their occurrence, may be properly brought together as varieties of one sub-species. "Literary" epic differs much more in the specific purpose of its art, as civilized societies differ much more than heroic, and also as the looser *milieu* of a civilization allows a less strictly traditional exercise of personal genius than an heroic age. Still, it does not require any manipulation to combine the "literary" epics from both series into a single process. Indeed, if we take Homer, Virgil and Milton as the outstanding events in the whole progress of epic poetry, and group the less important poems appropriately round these three names, we shall not be far from the *ideal truth* of epic development. We might say, then, that Homer begins the whole business of epic, imperishably fixes its type and, in a way that can never be questioned, declares its artistic purpose; Virgil perfects the type; and Milton perfects the purpose. Three such poets are not, heaven knows, summed up in a phrase; I mean merely to indicate how they are related one to another in the general scheme of epic poetry. For discriminating their merits, deciding their comparative eminence, I have no inclination; and fortunately it does not come within the requirements of this essay. Indeed, I think the

reader will easily excuse me, if I touch very slightly on the poetic manner, in the common and narrow sense, of the poets whom I shall have to mention; since these qualities have been so often and sometimes so admirably dealt with. It is at the broader aspects of artistic purpose that I wish to look.

"From Homer," said Goethe, "I learn every day more clearly, that in our life here above ground we have, properly speaking, to enact Hell." It is rather a startling sentence at first. That poetry which, for us, in Thoreau's excellent words, "lies in the east of literature," scarcely suggests, in the usual opinion of it, Hell. We are tempted to think of Homer as the most fortunate of poets. It seems as if he had but to open his mouth and speak, to create divine poetry; and it does not lessen our sense of his good fortune when, on looking a little closer, we see that this is really the result of an unerring and unfailing art, an extraordinarily skilful technique. He had it entirely at his command; and he exercised it in a language in which, though it may be singularly artificial and conventional, we can still feel the wonder of its sensuous beauty and the splendour of its expressive power. It is a language that seems alive with eagerness to respond to imagination. Open Homer anywhere, and the casual grandeur of his untranslatable language appears; such lines as:

ἀμφὶ δὲ νῆες
σμερδαλέον κονάβησαν ἀυσάντων ὑπ' Ἀχαιῶν.[1]

That, you might say, is Homer at his ease ; when he exerts himself you get a miracle like :

σὺ δ' ἐν στροφάλιγγι κονίης
κεῖσο μέγας μεγαλωστὶ, λελασμένος ἱπποσυνάων.[2]

It seems the art of one who walked through the world of things endowed with the senses of a god, and able, with that perfection of effort that looks as if it were effortless, to fashion his experience into incorruptible song ; whether it be the dance of flies round a byre at milking-time, or a forest-fire on the mountains at night. The shape and clamour of waves breaking on the beach in a storm is as irresistibly recorded by Homer as the gleaming flowers which earth put forth to be the bed of Zeus and Hera in Gargaros, when a golden cloud was their coverlet, and Sleep sat on a pine tree near by in the likeness of a murmuring night-jar. It is an art so balanced, that when it tells us, with no special emphasis, how the Trojans came on with a din like the clangour of a flock of cranes, but the Achaians came on in silence, the temper of the two hosts is discriminated for the whole poem ; or, in the supreme instance, when it tells us how the old

[1] 'And all round the ships echoed terribly to the shouting Achaians.'

[2] 'When in a dusty whirlwind thou didst lie,
Thy valour lost, forgot thy chivalry.'—Ogilby.
(The version leaves out *μέγας μεγαλωστί*.)

men looked at Helen and said, "No wonder the young men fight for her!" then Helen's beauty must be accepted by the faith of all the world. The particulars of such poetry could be enumerated for pages; and this is the poetry which is filled, more than any other literature, in the *Iliad* with the nobility of men and women, in the *Odyssey* with the light of natural magic. And think of those gods of Homer's; he is the one poet who has been able to make the dark terrors of religion beautiful, harmless and quietly entertaining. It is easy to read this poetry and simply *enjoy* it; it is easy to say, the man whose spirit held this poetry must have been divinely happy. But this is the poetry whence Goethe learnt that the function of man is "to enact Hell."

Goethe is profoundly right; though possibly he puts it in a way to which Homer himself might have demurred. For the phrase inevitably has its point in the word "Hell"; Homer, we may suppose, would have preferred the point to come in the word "enact." In any case, the details of Christian eschatology must not engage us much in interpreting Goethe's epigram. There is truth in it, not simply because the two poems take place in a theatre of calamity; not simply, for instance, because of the beloved Hektor's terrible agony of death, and the woes of Andromache and Priam. Such things are the partial, incidental expressions of the whole artistic purpose. Still less is it because of a strain of

latent savagery in, at any rate, the *Iliad;* as when the sage and reverend Nestor urges that not one of the Greeks should go home until he has lain with the wife of a slaughtered Trojan, or as in the tremendous words of the oath: "Whoever first offend against this oath, may their brains be poured out on the ground like this wine, their own and their children's, and may their wives be made subject to strangers." All that is one of the accidental qualities of Homer. But the force of the word "enact" in Goethe's epigram will certainly come home to us when we think of those famous speeches in which courage is unforgettably declared—such speeches as that of Sarpedon to Glaukos, or of Glaukos to Diomedes, or of Hektor at his parting with Andromache. What these speeches mean, however, in the whole artistic purpose of Homer, will assuredly be missed if they are *detached* for consideration; especially we shall miss the deep significance of the fact that in all of these speeches the substantial thought falls, as it were, into two clauses. Courage is in the one clause, a deliberate facing of death; but something equally important is in the other. Is it honour? The Homeric hero makes a great deal of honour; but it is honour paid to himself, living; what he wants above everything is to be admired—"always to be the best"; that is what true heroism is. But he is to go where he knows death will strike at him; and he does not make much of

honour after death ; for him, the meanest man living is better than a dead hero. Death ends everything, as far as he is concerned, honour and all ; his courage looks for no reward hereafter. No ; but *since* ten thousand fates of death are always instant round us ; *since* the generations of men are of no more account than leaves of a tree ; *since* Troy and all its people will soon be destroyed—he will stand in death's way. Sarpedon emphasizes this with its converse : There would be no need of daring and fighting, he says, of " man-ennobling battle," if we could be for ever ageless and deathless. That is the heroic age ; any other would say, If only we could not be killed, how pleasant to run what might have been risks ! For the hero, that would simply not be worth while. Does he find them pleasant, then, just because they are risky ? Not quite ; that, again, is to detach part of the meaning from the whole. If anywhere, we shall, perhaps, find the whole meaning of Homer most clearly indicated in such words as those given (without any enforcement) to Achilles and Thetis near the beginning of the *Iliad*, as if to sound the pitch of Homer's poetry :

> μῆτερ, ἐπεί μ' ἔτεκές γε μινυνθάδιόν περ ἐόντα,
> τιμήν πέρ μοι ὄφελλεν Ὀλύμπιος ἐγγυαλίξαι
> Ζεὺς ὑψιβρεμέτης.[1]
>
> . . . . . .

[1] 'Mother, since thou didst bear me to be so short-lived, Olympian Zeus that thunders from on high should especially have bestowed honour on me.'

τίμησόν μοι υἱόν, ὃς ὠκυμορώτατος ἄλλων
ἔπλετ.'[1]

Μιννθάδιον—ὠκυμορώτατος: those are the important words; key-words, they might be called. If we really understand these lines, if we see in them what it is that Agamemnon's insult has deprived Achilles of—the sign and acknowledgment of his fellows' admiration while he is still living among them, the one thing which makes a hero's life worth living, which enables him to enact his Hell—we shall scarcely complain that the *Iliad* is composed on a second-rate subject. The significance of the poem is not in the incidents surrounding the "Achilleis"; the whole significance is centred in the Wrath of Achilles, and thence made to impregnate every part.

Life is short; we must make the best of it. How trite that sounds! But it is not trite at all really. It seems difficult, sometimes, to believe that there was a time when sentiments now become habitual, sentiments that imply not only the original imperative of conduct, but the original metaphysic of living, were by no means altogether habitual. It is difficult to imagine backwards into the time when self-consciousness was still so fresh from its emergence out of the mere tribal consciousness of savagery, that it must not only accept the fact, but first intensely *realize*, that man is ὠκυμορώτατος—a thing of swiftest

[1] 'Honour my son for me, for the swiftest doom of all is his.'

doom. And it was for men who were able, and forced, to do that, that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the other early epics were composed. But life is not only short; it is, in itself, *valueless*. "As the generation of leaves, so is the generation of men." The life of man matters to nobody but himself. It happens incidentally in universal destiny; but beyond just happening it has no function. No function, of course, except for man himself. If man is to find any value in life it is he himself that must create the value. For the sense of the ultimate uselessness of life, of the blankness of imperturbable darkness that surrounds it, Goethe's word "Hell" is not too shocking. But no one has properly lived who has not felt this Hell; and we may easily believe that in an heroic age, the intensity of this feeling was the secret of the intensity of living. For where will the primitive instinct of man, where will the hero, find the chance of creating a value for life? In danger, and in the courage that welcomes danger. That not only evaluates life; it derives the value from the very fact that forces man to create value—the fact of his swift and instant doom—ὠκυμορώτατος once more; it makes this dreadful fact *enjoyable*. And so, with courage as the value of life, and man thence delightedly accepting whatever can be made of his passage, the doom of life is not simply suffered; man enacts his own life; he has mastered it.

We need not say that this is the lesson of

Homer. And all this, barely stated, is a very different matter from what it is when it is poetically symbolized in the vast and shapely substance of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It is quite possible, of course, to appreciate, pleasantly and externally, the *Iliad* with its pressure of thronging life and its daring unity, and the *Odyssey* with its serener life and its superb construction, though much more sectional unity. But we do not appreciate what Homer did for his time, and is still doing for all the world, we do not appreciate the spirit of his music, unless we see the warfare and the adventure as symbols of the primary courage of life ; and there is more in those words than seems when they are baldly written. And it is not his morals, but Homer's art that does that for us. And what Homer's art does supremely, the other early epics do in their way too. Their way is not to be compared with Homer's way. They are very much nearer than he is to the mere epic material—to the moderate accomplishment of the primitive ballad. Apart from their greatness, and often successful greatness, of intention, perhaps the only one that has an answerable greatness in the detail of its technique is *Beowulf*. That is not on account of its "kennings"—the strange device by which early popular poetry (Hesiod is another instance) tries to liberate and master the magic of words. A good deal has been made of these "kennings" ; but it does not take us far towards great poetry,

to have the sea called " whale-road " or " swan-road " or " gannet's-bath " ; though we are getting nearer to it when the sun is called " candle of the firmament " or " heaven's gem." On the whole, the poem is composed in an elaborate, ambitious diction which is not properly governed. Alliteration proves a somewhat dangerous principle ; it seems mainly responsible for the way the poet makes his sentences by piling up clauses, like shooting a load of stones out of a cart. You cannot always make out exactly what he means ; and it is doubtful whether he always had a clearly-thought meaning. Most of the subsidiary matter is foisted in with monstrous clumsiness. Yet *Beowulf* has what we do not find, out of Homer, in the other early epics. It has occasionally an unforgettable grandeur of phrasing. And it has other and perhaps deeper poetic qualities. When the warriors are waiting in the haunted hall for the coming of the marsh-fiend Grendel, they fall into untroubled sleep ; and the poet adds, with Homeric restraint : " Not one of them thought that he should thence be ever seeking his loved home again, his people or free city, where he was nurtured." The opening is magnificent, one of the noblest things that have been done in language. There is some wonderful grim landscape in the poem ; towards the middle there is a great speech on deterioration through prosperity, a piece of sustained intensity that reads like an Æschylean chorus ;

and there is some admirable fighting, especially the fight with Grendel in the hall, and with Grendel's mother under the waters, while Beowulf's companions anxiously watch the troubled surface of the mere. The fact that the action of the poem is chiefly made of single combat with supernatural creatures and that there is no tapestry figured with radiant gods drawn between the life of men and the ultimate darkness, gives a peculiar and notable character to the way Beowulf symbolizes the primary courage of life. One would like to think, with some enthusiasts, that this great poem, composed in a language totally unintelligible to the huge majority of Englishmen—further from English than Latin is from Italian—and perhaps not even composed in England, certainly not concerned either with England or Englishmen, might nevertheless be called an English epic.

But of course the early epics do not, any of them, merely repeat the significance of Homer in another form. They might do that, if poetry had to inculcate a moral, as some have supposed. But however nicely we may analyse it, we shall never find in poetry a significance which is really detachable, and expressible in another way. The significance *is* the poetry. What *Beowulf* or the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* means is simply what it is in its whole nature ; we can but roughly indicate it. And as poetry is never the same, so its significance is never quite the same. Courage

as the first necessary value of life is most naively and simply expressed, perhaps, in the *Poem of the Cid ;* but even here the expression is, as in all art, unique, and chiefly because it is contrived through solidly imagined characters. There is splendid characterization, too, in the *Song of Roland*, together with a fine sense of poetic form ; not fine enough, however, to avoid a prodigious deal of conventional gag. The battling is lavish, but always exciting ; and in, at least, that section which describes how the dying Oliver, blinded by weariness and wounds, mistakes Roland for a pagan and feebly smites him with his sword, there is real and piercing pathos. But for all his sense of character, the poet has very little discretion in his admiration of his heroes. Christianity, in these two poems, has less effect than one might think. The conspicuous value of life is still the original value, courage ; but elaboration and refinement of this begin to appear, especially in the *Song of Roland*, as passionately conscious patriotism and loyalty. The chief contribution of the *Nibelungenlied* to the main process of epic poetry is *plot* in narrative ; a contribution, that is, to the manner rather than to the content of epic symbolism. There is something that can be called plot in Homer ; but with him, as in all other early epics, it is of no great account compared with the straightforward linking of incidents into a direct chain of narrative. The story of the *Nibelungenlied*,

however, is not a chain but a web. Events and the influence of characters are woven closely and intricately together into one tragic pattern ; and this requires not only characterization, but also the adding to the characters of persistent and dominant motives.

Epic poetry exhibits life in some great symbolic attitude. It cannot strictly be said to symbolize life itself, but always some manner of life. But life as courage—the turning of the dark, hard condition of life into something which can be exulted in—this, which is the deep significance of the art of the first epics, is the absolutely necessary foundation for any subsequent valuation of life ; Man can achieve nothing until he has first achieved courage. And this, much more than any inheritance of manner, is what makes all the writers of deliberate or " literary " epic imply the existence of Homer. If Homer had not done his work, they could not have done theirs. But " literary " epics are as necessary as Homer. We cannot go on with courage as the solitary valuation of life. We must have the foundation, but we must also have the superstructure. Speaking comparatively, it may be said that the function of Homeric epic has been to create imperishable symbolism for the actual courageous consciousness of life, but the duty of " literary " epic has been to develop this function, answerably to the development of life itself, into symbolism of some conscious *idea* of life—something

at once more formalized and more subtilized than the primary virtue of courage. The Greeks, however, were too much overshadowed by the greatness of Homer to do much towards this. The *Argonautica*, the half-hearted epic of Apollonius Rhodius, is the only attempt that need concern us. It is not a poem that can be read straight through; it is only enjoyable in moments—moments of charming, minute observation, like the description of a sunbeam thrown quivering on the wall from a basin of water "which has just been poured out," lines not only charming in themselves, but finely used as a simile for Medea's agitated heart; or moments of romantic fantasy, as when the Argonauts see the eagle flying towards Prometheus, and then hear the Titan's agonized cry. But it is not in such passages that what Apollonius did for epic abides. A great deal of his third book is a real contribution to the main process, to epic content as well as to epic manner. To the manner of epic he added analytic psychology. No one will ever imagine character more deeply or more firmly than Homer did in, say, Achilles; but Apollonius was the man who showed how epic as well as drama may use the nice minutiæ of psychological imagination. Through Virgil, this contribution to epic manner has pervaded subsequent literature. Apollonius, too, in his fumbling way, as though he did not quite know what he was doing, has yet done something very

important for the development of epic significance. Love has been nothing but a subordinate incident, almost one might say an ornament, in the early epics ; in Apollonius, though working through a deal of gross and lumbering mythological machinery, love becomes for the first time one of the primary values of life. The love of Jason and Medea is the vital symbolism of the *Argonautica*.

But it is Virgil who really begins the development of epic art. He took over from Apollonius love as part of the epic symbolism of life, and delicate psychology as part of the epic method. And, like Apollonius, he used these novelties chiefly in the person of a heroine. But in Virgil they belong to an incomparably greater art ; and it is through Virgil that they have become necessities of the epic tradition. More than this, however, was required of him. The epic poet collaborates with the spirit of his time in the composition of his work. That is, if he is successful ; the time may refuse to work with him, but he may not refuse to work with his time. Virgil not only implies, he often clearly states, the original epic values of life, the Homeric values ; as in the famous

> Stat sua cuique dies ; breve et inreparabile tempus
> Omnibus est vitæ : sed famam extendere factis,
> Hoc virtutis opus.[1]

[1] "For everyone his own day is appointed ; for all men the period of life is short and not to be recalled : but to spread glory by deeds, that is what valour can do."

But to write a poem chiefly to symbolize this simple, heroic metaphysic would scarcely have done for Virgil; it would certainly not have done for his time. It was eminently a time of social organization, one might perhaps say of social consciousness. After Sylla and Marius and Cæsar, life as an affair of sheer individualism would not very strongly appeal to a thoughtful Roman. Accordingly, as has so often been remarked, the *Æneid* celebrates the Roman Empire. A political idea does not seem a very likely subject for a kind of poetry which must declare greatly the fundamentals of living; not even when it is a political idea unequalled in the world, the idea of the Roman Empire. Had Virgil been a *good Roman*, the *Æneid* might have been what no doubt Augustus, and Rome generally, desired, a political epic. But Virgil was not a good Roman; there was something in him that was not Roman at all. It was this strange incalculable element in him that seems for ever making him accomplish something he had not thought of; it was surely this that made him, unintentionally it may be, use the idea of the Roman Empire as a vehicle for a much profounder valuation of life. We must remember here the Virgil of the Fourth Eclogue —that extraordinary, impassioned poem in which he dreams of man attaining to some perfection of living. It is still this Virgil, though saddened and resigned, who writes the *Æneid*.

Man creating his own destiny, man, however wearied with the long task of resistance, achieving some conscious community of aspiration, and dreaming of the perfection of himself: the poet whose lovely and noble art makes us a great symbol of *that*, is assuredly carrying on the work of Homer. This was the development in epic intention required to make epic poetry answer to the widening needs of civilization.

But even more important, in the whole process of epic, than what Virgil's art does, is the way it does it. And this in spite of the fact which everyone has noticed, that Virgil does not compare with Homer as a poet of seafaring and warfaring. He is not, indeed, very interested in either; and it is unfortunate that, in managing the story of Æneas (in itself an excellent medium for his symbolic purpose) he felt himself compelled to try for some likeness to the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*—to do by art married to study what the poet of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* had done by art married to intuitive experience. But his failure in this does not matter much in comparison with his technical success otherwise. Virgil showed how poetry may be made deliberately adequate to the epic purpose. That does not mean that Virgil is more artistic than Homer. Homer's redundance, wholesale repetition of lines, and stock epithets cannot be altogether dismissed as "faults"; they are characteristics of a wonderfully accomplished and efficient

technique. But epic poetry cannot be written as Homer composed it; whereas it must be written something as Virgil wrote it; yes, if epic poetry is to be *written*, Virgil must show how that is to be done. The superb Virgilian economy is the thing for an epic poet now; the concision, the scrupulousness, the loading of every word with something appreciable of the whole significance. After the *Æneid*, the epic style must be of this fashion:

> Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram
> Perque domos Ditis vacuas et inania regna:
> Quale per incertam lunam sub luce maligna
> Est iter in silvis, ubi cælum condidit umbra
> Jupiter, et rebus nox abstulit atra colorem.[1]

Lucan is much more of a Roman than Virgil; and the *Pharsalia*, so far as it is not an historical epic, is a political one; the idea of political liberty is at the bottom of it. That is not an unworthy theme; and Lucan evidently felt the necessity for development in epic. But he made the mistake, characteristically Roman, of thinking history more real than legend; and, trying to lead epic in this direction, supernatural machinery would inevitably go too. That,

[1] "They wer' amid the shadows by night in loneliness obscure
Walking forth i' the void and vasty dominyon of Ades;
As by an uncertain moonray secretly illumin'd
One goeth in the forest, when heav'n is gloomily clouded,
And black night hath robb'd the colours and beauty from all things."—Robert Bridges.

perhaps, was fortunate, for it enabled Lucan safely to introduce one of his great and memorable lines :

Jupiter est quodcunque vides, quodcunque moveris ;[1]

which would certainly explode any supernatural machinery that could be invented. The *Pharsalia* could not be anything more than an interesting but unsuccessful attempt ; it was not on these lines that epic poetry was to develop. Lucan died at an age when most poets have done nothing very remarkable ; that he already had achieved a poem like the *Pharsalia*, would make us think he might have gone to incredible heights, were it not that the mistake of the *Pharsalia* seems to belong incurably to his temperament.

Lucan's determined stoicism may, philosophically, be more consistent than the dubious stoicism of Virgil. But Virgil knew that, in epic, supernatural imagination is better than consistency. It was an important step when he made Jupiter, though a personal god, a power to which no limits are assigned ; when he also made the other divinities but shadows, or, at most, functions, of Jupiter. This answers to his conviction that spirit universally and singly pervades matter ; but, what is more, it answers to the needs of epic development. When we come to Tasso and Camoens, we seem to have gone backward in this respect ; we seem to come upon

[1] "All that is known, all that is felt, is God."

poetry in which supernatural machinery is in a state of chronic insubordination. But that, too, was perhaps necessary. In comparison with the *Æneid*, *Gerusalemme Liberata* and *Os Lusiadas* lack intellectual control and spiritual depth; but in comparison with the Roman, the two modern poems thrill with a new passion of life, a new wine of life, heady, as it seems, with new significance—a significance as yet only felt, not understood. Both Tasso and Camoens clearly join on to the main epic tradition: Tasso derives chiefly from the *Æneid* and the *Iliad*, Camoens from the *Æneid* and the *Odyssey*. Tasso is perhaps more Virgilian than Camoens; the plastic power of his imagination is more assured. But the advantage Camoens has over Tasso seems to repeat the advantage Homer has over Virgil; the ostensible subject of the *Lusiads* glows with the truth of experience. But the real subject is behind these splendid voyagings, just as the real subject of Tasso is behind the battles of Christian and Saracen; and in both poets the inmost theme is broadly the same. It is the consciousness of modern Europe. *Jerusalem Delivered* and the *Lusiads* are drenched with the spirit of the Renaissance; and that is chiefly responsible for their lovely poetry. But they reach out towards the new Europe that was then just beginning. Europe making common cause against the peoples that are not Europe; Europe carrying her domination round the

world—is that what Tasso and Camoens ultimately mean ? It would be too hard and too narrow a matter by itself to make these poems what they are. No ; it is not the action of Europe, but the spirit of European consciousness, that gave Tasso and Camoens their deepest inspiration. But what European consciousness really is, these poets rather vaguely suggest than master into clear and irresistible expression, into the supreme symbolism of perfectly adequate art. They still took European consciousness as an affair of geography and race rather than simply as a triumphant stage in the general progress of man's knowledge of himself. Their time imposed a duty on them ; that they clearly understood. But they did not clearly understand what the duty was ; partly, no doubt, because they were both strongly influenced by mediæval religion. And so it is atmosphere, in Tasso and Camoens, that counts much more than substance ; both poets seem perpetually thrilled by something they cannot express—the *non so che* of Tasso. And what chiefly gives this sense of quivering, uncertain significance to their poetry is the increase of freedom and decrease of control in the supernatural. Supernaturalism was emphasized, because they instinctively felt that this was the means epic poetry must use to accomplish its new duties ; it was disorderly, because they did not quite know what use these duties required. Tasso and Camoens, for all the

splendour and loveliness of their work, leave epic poetry, as it were, consciously dissatisfied—knowing that its future must achieve some significance larger and deeper than anything it had yet done, and knowing that this must be done somehow through imagined supernaturalism. It waited nearly a hundred years for the poet who understood exactly what was to be done and exactly how to do it.

In *Paradise Lost*, the development of epic poetry culminates, as far as it has yet gone. The essential inspiration of the poem implies a particular sense of human existence which has not yet definitely appeared in the epic series, but which the process of life in Europe made it absolutely necessary that epic poetry should symbolize. In Milton, the poet arose who was supremely adequate to the greatest task laid on epic poetry since its beginning with Homer; Milton's task was perhaps even more exacting than that original one. "His work is not the greatest of heroic poems, only because it is not the first." The epigram might just as reasonably have been the other way round. But nothing would be more unprofitable than a discussion in which Homer and Milton compete for supremacy of genius. Our business here is quite otherwise.

With the partial exception of Tasso and Camoens, all epic poetry before Milton is some symbolism of man's sense of his own will. It is

simply this in Homer ; and the succeeding poets developed this intention but remained well within it. Not even Virgil, with his metaphysic of individual merged into social will—not even Virgil went outside it. In fact, it is a sort of *monism* of consciousness that inspires all pre-Miltonic epic. But in Milton, it has become a *dualism*. Before him, the primary impulse of epic is an impassioned sense of man's nature *being contained*—by his destiny: *his* only because he is in it and belongs to it, as we say "*my* country." With Milton, this has necessarily become not only a sense of man's rigorously contained nature, but equally a sense of that which contains man—in fact, simultaneously a sense of individual will and of universal necessity. The single sense of these two irreconcilables is what Milton's poetry has to symbolize. Could they be reconciled, the two elements in man's modern consciousness of existence would form a monism. But this consciousness is a dualism ; its elements are absolutely opposed. *Paradise Lost* is inspired by intense consciousness of the eternal contradiction between the general, unlimited, irresistible will of universal destiny, and defined individual will existing within this, and inexplicably capable of acting on it, even against it. Or, if that seems too much of an antinomy to some philosophies (and it is perhaps possible to make it look more apparent than real), the dualism can be un-

avoidably declared by putting it entirely in terms of consciousness : destiny creating within itself an existence which stands against and apart from destiny by being *conscious* of it. In Milton's poetry the spirit of man is equally conscious of its own limited reality and of the unlimited reality of that which contains him and drives him with its motion—of his own will striving in the midst of destiny : destiny irresistible, yet his will unmastered.

This is not to examine the development of epic poetry by looking at that which is not *poetry*. In this kind of art, more perhaps than in any other, we must ignore the wilful theories of those who would set boundaries to the meaning of the word poetry. In such a poem as Milton's, whatever is in it is its poetry ; the poetry of *Paradise Lost* is just—*Paradise Lost !* Its pomp of divine syllables and glorious images is no more the poetry of Milton than the idea of man which he expressed. But the general manner of an art is for ever similar ; it is its inspiration that is for ever changing. We need never expect words and metre to do more than they do here :

> they, fondly thinking to allay
> Their appetite with gust, instead of fruit
> Chewed bitter ashes, which the offended taste
> With spattering noise rejected : oft they assayed,
> Hunger and thirst constraining ; drugged as oft,
> With hatefullest disrelish writhed their jaws,
> With soot and cinders filled ;

or more than they do here :

> What though the field be lost?
> All is not lost; the unconquerable will,
> And study of revenge, immortal hate,
> And courage never to submit or yield,
> And what is else not to be overcome.

But what Homer's words, and perhaps what Virgil's words, set out to do, they do just as marvellously. There is no sure way of comparison here. How words do their work in poetry, and how we appreciate the way they do it—this seems to involve the obscurest processes of the mind: analysis can but fumble at it. But we can compare inspiration—the nature of the inmost urgent motive of poetry. And it is not irrelevant to add (it seems to me mere fact), that Milton had the greatest motive that has ever ruled a poet.

For the vehicle of this motive, a fable of purely human action would obviously not suffice. What Milton has to express is, of course, altogether human; destiny is an entirely human conception. But he has to express not simply the sense of human existence occurring in destiny; that brings in destiny only mediately, through that which is destined. He has to express the sense of destiny immediately, at the same time as he expresses its opponent, the destined will of man. Destiny will appear in poetry as an omnipotent God; Virgil had already prepared poetry for

that. But the action at large must clearly consist now, and for the first time, overwhelmingly of supernatural imagination. Milton has been foolishly blamed for making his supernaturalism too human. But nothing can come into poetry that is not shaped and recognizable; how else but in anthropomorphism could destiny, or (its poetic equivalent) deity, exist in *Paradise Lost?* We may see what a change has come over epic poetry, if we compare this supernatural imagination of Milton's with the supernatural machinery of any previous epic poet. Virgil is the most scrupulous in this respect; and towards the inevitable change, which Milton completed and perfected from Camoens and Tasso, Virgil took a great step in making Jupiter professedly almighty. But compare Virgil's "Tantæne animis celestibus iræ?" with Milton's "Evil, be thou my good!" It is the difference between an accidental device and essential substance. That, in order to symbolize in epic form—that is to say, in *narrative* form—the dualistic sense of destiny and the destined, and both immediately—Milton had to dissolve his human action completely in a supernatural action, is the sign not merely of a development, but of a re-creation, of epic art.

It has been said that Satan is the hero of *Paradise Lost.* The offence which the remark has caused is due, no doubt, to injudicious use of the word "hero." It is surely the simple fact

that if *Paradise Lost* exists for any one figure, that is Satan; just as the *Iliad* exists for Achilles, and the *Odyssey* for Odysseus. It is in the figure of Satan that the imperishable significance of *Paradise Lost* is centred; his vast unyielding agony symbolizes the profound antinomy of modern consciousness. And if this is what he is in significance it is worth noting what he is in technique. He is the blending of the poem's human plane with its supernatural plane. The epic hero has always represented humanity by being superhuman; in Satan he has grown into the supernatural. He does not thereby cease to symbolize human existence; but he is thereby able to symbolize simultaneously the sense of its irreconcilable condition, of the universal destiny that contains it. Out of Satan's colossal figure, the single urgency of inspiration, which this dualistic consciousness of existence makes, radiates through all the regions of Milton's vast and rigorous imagination. "Milton," says Landor, "even Milton rankt with living men!"

V

AFTER MILTON

And after Milton, what is to happen? First, briefly, for a few instances of what has happened. We may leave out experiments in religious sentiment like Klopstock's *Messiah*. We must leave out also poems which have something of the look of epic at first glance, but have nothing of the scope of epic intention; such as Scott's longer poems. These might resemble the "lays" out of which some people imagine "authentic" epic to have been made. But the lays are not the epic. Scott's poems have not the depth nor the definiteness of symbolic intention—what is sometimes called the epic unity—and this is what we can always discover in any poetry which gives us the peculiar experience we must associate with the word epic, if it is to have any precision of meaning. What applies to Scott, will apply still more to Byron's poems; Byron is one of the greatest of modern poets, but that does not make him an epic poet. We must keep our minds on epic intention. Shelley's *Revolt of Islam* has something of it, but too vaguely and too fantastically; the generality of human experience had little to do with this glittering poem. Keats's *Hyperion* is

wonderful; but it does not go far enough to let us form any judgment of it appropriate to the present purpose.[1] Our search will not take us far before we notice something very remarkable; poems which look superficially like epic turn out to have scarce anything of real epic intention; whereas epic intention is apt to appear in poems that do not look like epic at all. In fact, it seems as if epic manner and epic content were trying for a divorce. If this be so, the traditional epic manner will scarcely survive the separation. Epic content, however, may very well be looking out for a match with a new manner; though so far it does not seem to have found an altogether satisfactory partner.

But there are one or two poems in which the

[1] In the greatest poetry, all the elements of human nature are burning in a single flame. The artifice of criticism is to detect what peculiar radiance each element contributes to the whole light; but this no more affects the singleness of the compounded energy in poetry than the spectroscopic examination of fire affects the single nature of actual flame. For the purposes of this book, it has been necessary to look chiefly at the contribution of intellect to epic poetry; for it is in that contribution that the development of poetry, so far as there is any development at all, really consists. This being so, it might be thought that Keats could hardly have done anything for the real progress of epic. But Keats's apparent (it is only apparent) rejection of intellect in his poetry was the result of youthful theory; his letters show that, in fact, intellect was a thing unusually vigorous in his nature. If the Keats of the letters be added to the Keats of the poems, a personality appears that seems more likely than any of his contemporaries, or than anyone who has come after him, for the work of carrying Miltonic epic forward without forsaking Miltonic form.

old union seems still happy. Most noteworthy is Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea*. You may say that it does not much matter whether such poetry should be called epic or, as some hold, idyllic. But it is interesting to note, first, that the poem is deliberately written with epic style and epic intention; and, second, that, though singularly beautiful, it makes no attempt to add anything to epic development. It is interesting, too, to see epic poetry trying to get away from its heroes, and trying to use material the poetic importance of which seems to depend solely on the treatment, not on itself. This was a natural and, for some things, a laudable reaction. But it inevitably meant that epic must renounce the triumphs which Milton had won for it. William Morris saw no reason for abandoning either the heroes or anything else of the epic tradition. The chief personages of *Sigurd the Volsung* are admittedly more than human, the events frankly marvellous. The poem is an impressive one, and in one way or another fulfils all the main qualifications of epic. But perhaps no great poem ever had so many faults. These have nothing to do with its management of supernaturalism; those who object to this simply show ignorance of the fundamental necessities of epic poetry. The first book is magnificent; everything that epic narrative should be; but after this the poem grows long-winded, and that is the last thing epic poetry should be. It is written with a

running pen ; so long as the verse keeps going on, Morris seems satisfied, though it is very often going on about unimportant things, and in an uninteresting manner. After the first book, indeed, as far as Morris's epic manner is concerned, Virgil and Milton might never have lived. It attempts to be the grand manner by means of vagueness. In an altogether extraordinary way, the poem slurs over the crucial incidents (as in the inept lines describing the death of Fafnir, and those, equally hollow, describing the death of Guttorm—two noble opportunities simply not perceived) and tirelessly expatiates on the mere surroundings of the story. Yet there is no attempt to make anything there credible : Morris seems to have mixed up the effects of epic with the effects of a fairy-tale. The poem lacks intellect ; it has no clear-cut thought. And it lacks sensuous images ; it is full of the sentiment, not of the sense of things, which is the wrong way round. Hence the protracted conversations are as a rule amazingly windy and pointless, as the protracted descriptions are amazingly useless and tedious. And the superhuman virtues of the characters are not shown in the poem so much as energetically asserted. It says much for the genius of Morris that *Sigurd the Volsung*, with all these faults, is not to be condemned ; that, on the contrary, to read it is rather a great than a tiresome experience ; and not only because the faults are relieved, here and there, by exquisite

beauties and dignities, indeed by incomparable lines, but because the poem as a whole does, as it goes on, accumulate an immense pressure of significance. All the great epics of the world have, however, perfectly clearly a significance in close relation with the spirit of their time; the intense desire to symbolize the consciousness of man as far as it has attained, is what vitally inspires an epic poet, and the ardour of this infects his whole style. Morris, in this sense, was not vitally inspired. *Sigurd the Volsung* is a kind of set exercise in epic poetry. It is great, but it is not *needed*. It is, in fact, an attempt to write epic poetry as it might have been written, and to make epic poetry mean what it might have meant, in the days when the tale of Sigurd and the Niblungs was newly come among men's minds. Mr. Doughty, in his surprising poem *The Dawn in Britain*, also seems trying to compose an epic exercise, rather than to be obeying a vital necessity of inspiration. For all that, it is a great poem, full of irresistible vision and memorable diction. But it is written in a revolutionary syntax, which, like most revolutions of this kind, achieves nothing beyond the fact of being revolutionary; and Mr. Doughty often uses the unexpected effects of his queer syntax instead of the unexpected effects of poetry, which makes the poem even longer psychologically than it is physically. Landor's *Gebir* has much that can truly be called epic in it;

and it has learned the lessons in manner which Virgil and Milton so nobly taught. It has perhaps learned them too well; never were concision, and the loading of each word with heavy duties, so thoroughly practised. The action is so compressed that it is difficult to make out exactly what is going on; we no sooner realize that an incident has begun than we find ourselves in the midst of another. Apart from these idiosyncrasies, the poetry of *Gebir* is a curious mixture of splendour and commonplace. If fiction could ever be wholly, and not only partially, epic, it would be in *Gebir*.

In all these poems, we see an epic intention still combined with a recognizably epic manner. But what is quite evident is, that in all of them there is no attempt to carry on the development of epic, to take up its symbolic power where Milton left it. On the contrary, this seems to be deliberately avoided. For any tentative advance on Miltonic significance, even for any real acceptance of it, we must go to poetry which tries to put epic intention into a new form. Some obvious peculiarities of epic style are sufficiently definite to be detachable. Since Theocritus, a perverse kind of pleasure has often been obtained by putting some of the peculiarities of epic—peculiarities really required by a very long poem—into the compass of a very short poem. An epic idyll cannot, of course, contain any considerable epic intention; it is wrought out of the mere

shell of epic, and avoids any semblance of epic scope. But by devising somehow a connected sequence of idylls, something of epic scope can be acquired again. As Hugo says, in his preface to *La Legende des Siècles :* " Comme dans une mosaïque, chaque pierre a sa couleur et sa forme propre ; l'ensemble donne une figure. La figure de ce livre," he goes on, " c'est l'homme." To get an epic design or *figure* through a sequence of small idylls need not be the result of mere technical curiosity. It may be a valuable method for the future of epic. Tennyson attempted this method in *Idylls of the King ;* not, as is now usually admitted, with any great success. The sequence is admirable for sheer craftsmanship, for astonishing craftsmanship ; but it did not manage to effect anything like a conspicuous symbolism. You have but to think of *Paradise Lost* to see what *Idylls of the King* lacks. Victor Hugo, however, did better in *La Legende des Siècles.* " La figure, c'est l'homme " ; there, at any rate, is the intention of epic symbolism. And, however pretentious the poem may be, it undoubtedly does make a passionate effort to develop the significance which Milton had achieved ; chiefly to enlarge the scope of this significance.[1] Browning's *The Ring and the Book*

[1] For all I know, Hugo may never have read Milton ; judging by some silly remarks of his, I should hope not. But Hugo could feel the things in the spirit of man that Milton felt ; not only because they were still there, but because the secret influence of Milton has intensified the consciousness of them in

also uses this notion of an idyllic sequence ; but without any semblance of epic purpose, purely for the exhibition of human character.

It has already been remarked that the ultimate significance of great drama is the same as that of epic. Since the vital epic purpose—the kind of epic purpose which answers to the spirit of the time—is evidently looking for some new form to inhabit, it is not surprising, then, that it should have occasionally tried on dramatic form. And, unquestionably, for great poetic symbolism of the depths of modern consciousness, for such symbolism as Milton's, we must go to two such invasions of epic purpose into dramatic manner—to Goethe's *Faust* and Hardy's *The Dynasts*. But dramatic significance and epic significance have been admitted to be broadly the same ; to take but one instance, Æschylus's Prometheus is closely related to Milton's Satan (though I think Prometheus really represents a monism of consciousness—that which is destined—as Satan represents a dualism—at once the destined

thousands who think they know nothing of *Paradise Lost*. Modern literary history will not be properly understood until it is realized that Milton is one of the dominating minds of Europe, whether Europe know it or not. There are scarcely half a dozen figures that can be compared with Milton for irresistible influence—quite apart from his unapproachable supremacy in the technique of poetry. When Addison remarked that *Paradise Lost* is universally and perpetually interesting, he said what is not to be questioned ; though he did not perceive the real reason for his assertion. Darwin no more injured the significance of *Paradise Lost* than air-planes have injured Homer.

and the destiny). How then can we speak of epic purpose invading drama ? Surely in this way. Drama seeks to present its significance with narrowed intensity, but epic in a large dilatation : the one contracts, the other expatiates. When, therefore, we find drama setting out its significance in such a way as to become epically dilated, we may say that dramatic has grown into epic purpose. Or, even more positively, we may say that epic has taken over drama and adapted it to its peculiar needs. In any case, with one exception to be mentioned presently, it is only in *Faust* and *The Dynasts* that we find any great development of Miltonic significance. These are the poems that give us immense and shapely symbols of the spirit of man, conscious not only of the sense of his own destined being, but also of some sense of that which destines. In fact, these two are the poems that develop and elaborate, in their own way, the Miltonic significance, as all the epics in between Homer and Milton develop and elaborate Homeric significance. And yet, in spite of *Faust* and *The Dynasts*, it may be doubted whether the union of epic and drama is likely to be permanent. The peculiar effects which epic intention, in whatever manner, must aim at, seem to be as much hindered as helped by dramatic form ; and possibly it is because the detail is necessarily too much enforced for the broad perfection of epic effect.

The real truth seems to be, that there is an

inevitable and profound difficulty in carrying on the Miltonic significance in anything like a story. Regular epic having reached its climax in *Paradise Lost*, the epic purpose must find some other way of going on. Hugo saw this, when he strung his huge epic sequence together not on a connected story but on a single idea: "la figure, c'est l'homme." If we are to have, as we must have, direct symbolism of the way man is conscious of his being nowadays, which means direct symbolism both of man's spirit and of the (philosophical) opponent of this, the universal fate of things—if we are to have all this, it is hard to see how any story can be adequate to such symbolic requirements, unless it is a story which moves in some large region of imagined supernaturalism. And it seems questionable whether we have enough *formal* "belief" nowadays to allow of such a story appearing as solid and as vividly credible as epic poetry needs. It is a decided disadvantage, from the purely epic point of view, that those admirable "Intelligences" in Hardy's *The Dynasts* are so obviously abstract ideas disguised. The supernaturalism of epic, however incredible it may be in the poem, must be worked up out of the material of some generally accepted belief. I think it would be agreed, that what was possible for Milton would scarcely be possible to-day; and even more impossible would be the naïveté of Homer and the quite different but equally

impracticable naïveté of Tasso and Camoens. The conclusion seems to be, that the epic purpose will have to abandon the necessity of telling a story.

Hugo's way may prove to be the right one. But there may be another; and what has happened in the past may suggest what may happen in the future. Epic poetry in the regular epic form has before now seemed unlikely. It seemed unlikely after the Alexandrians had made such poor attempts at standing upright under the immensity of Homer; it seemed so, until, after several efforts, Latin poetry became triumphantly epic in Virgil. And again, when the mystical prestige of Virgil was domineering everything, regular epic seemed unlikely; until, after the doubtful attempts of Boiardo and Ariosto, Tasso arrived. But in each case, while the occurrence of regular epic was seeming so improbable, it nevertheless happened that poetry was written which was certainly nothing like epic in form, but which was strongly charged with a profound pressure of purpose closely akin to epic purpose; and *De Rerum Natura* and *La Divina Commedia* are very suggestive to speculation now. Of course, the fact that, in both these cases, regular epic did eventually occur, must warn us that in artistic development anything may happen; but it does seem as if there were a deeper improbability for the occurrence of regular epic now than in the times just before Virgil and

Tasso—of regular epic, that is, inspired by some vital import, not simply, like *Sigurd the Volsung*, by archæological import. Lucretius is a good deal more suggestive than Dante ; for Dante's form is too exactly suited to his own peculiar genius and his own peculiar time to be adaptable. But the method of Lucretius is eminently adaptable. That amazing image of the sublime mind of Lucretius is exactly the kind of lofty symbolism that the continuation of epic purpose now seems to require—a subjective symbolism. I believe Wordsworth felt this, when he planned his great symbolic poem, and partly executed it in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion :* for there, more profoundly than anywhere out of Milton himself, Milton's spiritual legacy is employed. It may be, then, that Lucretius and Wordsworth will preside over the change from objective to subjective symbolism which Milton has, perhaps, made necessary for the continued development of the epic purpose : after Milton, it seems likely that there is nothing more to be done with objective epic. But Hugo's method, of a connected sequence of separate poems, instead of one continuous poem, may come in here. The determination to keep up a continuous form brought both Lucretius and Wordsworth at times perilously near to the odious state of didactic poetry ; it was at least responsible for some tedium. Epic poetry will certainly never be didactic. What we may imagine—who knows

how vainly imagine ?—is, then, a sequence of odes expressing, in the image of some fortunate and lofty mind, as much of the spiritual significance which the epic purpose must continue from Milton, as is possible, in the style of Lucretius and Wordsworth, for subjective symbolism. A pregnant experiment towards something like this has already been seen—in George Meredith's magnificent set of *Odes in Contribution to the Song of French History*. The subject is ostensibly concrete; but France in her agonies and triumphs has been personified into a superb symbol of Meredith's own reading of human fate. The series builds up a decidedly epic significance, and its manner is extraordinarily suggestive of a new epic method. Nevertheless, something more Lucretian in central imagination, something less bound to concrete and particular event, seems required for the complete development of epic purpose.

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